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Visual Tension in Graphic Design

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VISUAL TENSION IN GRAPHIC DESIGN

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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Western Kentucky University
2014

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ABSTRACT

My thesis explores the use of visual tension in various graphic design areas and works. It delves into the purposes of creating visual tension and in which instances it can be most effective, as well as most ineffective. It discusses the use and creation of visual tension with design hierarchy, rhythm and dynamics, symmetry and asymmetry, negative and positive space, color relationships, and typographical design. I will define visual tension, discuss its relevance and significance, and show informative examples. I'm using mainly secondary research in the form of textbooks and examples by other designers, but I have also included a few pieces I have designed myself. I hope to show exactly how important visual tension is to good design work when used properly and explain how best to create it.

Keywords: Contrast, Art, Advertising, Illustration, Balance

Dedicated to my family
for always supporting me in all my endeavors
and for being there for me no matter what.

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First of all, I would like to thank my parents who have always loved me and supported me in everything I have tried. None of this would have been possible without you and I am eternally grateful for all you have done and continue to do for me. Second, I would like to thank my grandparents for also loving me unconditionally and being a true inspiration to me. Third, I want to thank my brother, Skyler, for accepting me for who I am and being a friend as well. Fourth, I would like to thank Kelley Coppinger, who taught me to be confident in myself and in my work, but also that failure happens and what really matters is how you pick yourself up and keep trying. Fifth, I would like to thank Arden von Haeger, for showing me what passion for art looks like and inspiring me to be a better, more diverse, and more confident artist. Finally, I would like to thank Samantha Coates for being a good friend when I needed you most and keeping me focused and on track in school; I don't think I would have made it this far without you.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Graphic design is visual communication. As Paul Rand said in *A Designer's Art*, “Visual communication of any kind, whether persuasive or informative... should be seen as the embodiment of form and function: the integration of the beautiful and the useful” (3). Effective graphic design communicates a specific message in an interesting and memorable way. In order to do that, the design itself needs to captivate the viewer. A static design piece is a boring design piece. Generally, design needs contrast to be interesting, also called tension. Philip Meggs said in *Type & Image: The Language of Graphic Design*, creating dynamic tension in a layout is a good way to make an effective design piece. “This effect is achieved by creating taut relationships between the elements of the design and between the elements and the edge of the rectangle” (94). The level of tension utilized differs depending on the message the designer is trying communicate, and certain types of tension can be effective or ineffective based on this. As Timothy Samara said in *Design Elements: A Graphic Design Manual*, “Nothing kills a great idea like a dull layout that has no tension” (21).

I will be considering how to create effective levels of visual tension in different areas of design and how much is too much or too little tension, thus making it ineffective. The following areas of design will be discussed in relation to tension: design hierarchy,

rhythm and dynamics, symmetry and asymmetry, negative and positive space, color relationships, and typographical design.

I will be keeping in mind though that the amount of tension a designer uses can be effective or ineffective depending on the message they are trying to convey. As Kevin Mullet said in *Designing Visual Interfaces: Communication Oriented Techniques*, “Solutions can be more or less appropriate in their method, their process, or their outcome. Elegant solutions solve problems with maximum effectiveness through avenues that are desirable in their own right” (26). In other words, each unique problem calls for a unique and different solution. For example, if a designer wants a piece to speak of stability, consistency, and unchanging or fixed form, then less tension will be utilized and will therefore be effective for that purpose. If a designer wants a piece to overwhelm a viewer and be vivid or surreal, moving and unbalanced, then more tension will be used and will be more effective for that purpose.

CHAPTER 2

DESIGN HIERARCHY

Tension is needed when establishing design hierarchy. It can signify a focal point and then lead the viewer's eyes around the rest of the piece in a specific order. The amount of contrast present in each part will show the order of the hierarchy. According to Samara, "Focus viewers' attention on one important thing first, and then lead them through the rest. Once you capture the audience... steadily decrease the activity of each less important item in a logical way to help them get through it" (14).

The difference in contrast in each lesser item has to be obvious. As David Lauer said in *Design Basics*, "Several focal points of equal emphasis can turn the design into a three-ring circus in which the viewer does not know where to look first. Interest is replaced by confusion: when everything is emphasized, nothing is emphasized" (46). If a viewer can not determine hierarchy because there is not enough tension in a piece, then they will be more focused on trying to figure out what is wrong with a design and what is most important rather than the message that is supposed to be communicated. As Mullet said, "Contrast, like any other aspect of design is effective only when it is clearly intentional rather than random or accidental" (58).

Though it is important to keep in mind that there can be too much contrast between individual items on a page. "When a single element is too large or too small, too

light or too dark, too prominent or too distinct, the entire design suffers” (Mullet 51). Along the same lines, all of the elements in a piece need to maintain some sense of unity; they need to relate to each other in one way or another otherwise there will be too much discord and tension. As Lauer said, “Without some aspect of unity, an image or design becomes chaotic and quickly ‘unreadable.’ Without some elements of variety an image is lifeless and dull and becomes uninteresting. Neither utter confusion or utter irregularity are satisfying” (42).

Establishing hierarchy can even be a method of calming a layout wrought with visual tension. This is because “competition for ascendancy in the visual hierarchy can create dynamic tension between elements” that is overwhelming and uncomfortable to look at (Meggs 111). By making one aspect or part of a piece clearly dominant, a chaotic and tense layout can automatically feel more structured and balanced. “Order is achieved in spite of the complexity... because a major focal point is created” (Meggs 92).

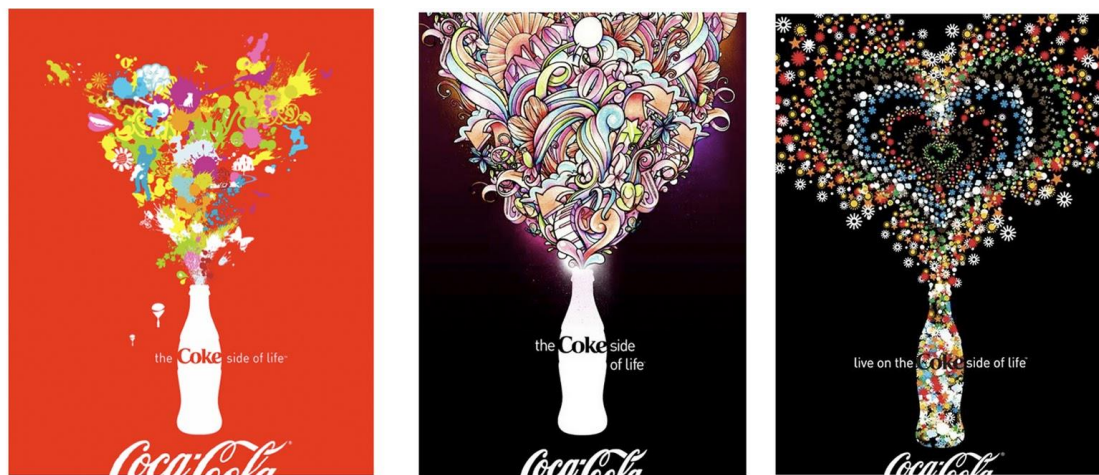


Figure 1 Coca-Cola Advertisements – Source: Coca-Cola Advertisements. 2010. Graphic. The Ugly UnicornWeb. 22 Mar 2014. <<http://theuglyunicorn.blogspot.com>>

In Figure 1, an example of the importance of design hierarchy is shown. In the image on the left, a viewer knows that the bottle and the word “Coca-Cola” is the focal point. The viewers’ eye is then lead from the bottle up through the explosion of vector images above it. The sequence from most important to least important is clearly defined. In the middle image, the viewer will have more of an issue focusing on one aspect over another. The design exploding out of the bottle grabs attention first, but the white coke bottle does too. In the image on the right, it is quite overwhelming and the viewer will try to take in everything in the image at once and will not know quite where to look, which can be confusing.

But it is important to keep in mind that the designer of the image on the right may have wanted this effect on the viewer. As Lauer said, “A definite focal point is not a necessity in creating a successful design” (56). In this instance, the severe lack of contrast creates more tension. Not having the focal point and series of importance clearly defined causes a lot of tension, which can be effective for some design purposes. But whether the designer is aiming for less or more tension, it must be done with purpose. As Samara said, “Decisiveness makes a viewer more likely to believe that the message means what it says” (23).

Essentially, establishing design hierarchy is dependent on the contrast between specific elements, or irregularities that make specific parts of a piece stand out first. As Mullet said, “Any irregularity will be interpreted as significant by the user.... By regularizing non-critical design elements throughout the work, you will be able to attract the user’s attention reliably by introducing an obvious irregularity wherever you do wish to make a distinction” (45). Meaning that the tension created by the differences between

certain more important elements of a piece is what shows what the viewer should be looking at first, second, third, etc. Although, a designer does not want too many contrasting elements on a page, because if everything's in contrast with each other the visual tension can be overwhelming and "the resulting chaos make effective communication impossible" (Mullet 66).

Possibly the simplest and most common way to establish hierarchy and create good contrast is to size the items from biggest to smallest in the order a designer wants them to be seen. As Meggs said, "Extreme contrasts of size and scale can play an important role in creating this tension" (94). Meggs also said, "The size of an element within the graphic space and its size relationship to other elements in the design are significant perceptual and communicative factors" (108). Because a layout with no focal point can have too much visual tension, making one element larger and establishing a focal point can immediately relieve this tension to a more acceptable level. "Large scale, especially large scale in proportion to other elements, makes for an obvious visual emphasis" (Lauer 60).



Figure 2 Waverly Hills Sanatorium Infographic

The design hierarchy that is at work in Figure 2 is one of the things keeping this piece from being overly tense. Of course a certain level of tension is maintained in this piece intentionally in order to give the reader an eerie and uneasy feeling, which helps communicate the intended message. But the hierarchy allows the piece to be tense and still navigable. The hierarchy is mainly based on the size concept. The largest item in the piece, and therefore the first thing the viewer will most likely look at, is the Waverly building itself. Second is the timeline box at the bottom of the piece. And third, fourth, and so on are all of the small pictures and fact boxes placed around the building. The irregularity of the brightness in certain areas also contributes to the hierarchy and

alleviated tension. The sky above the center of the building is the brightest area of the piece, the timeline box the second, and the smaller pieces have different brightness levels as well.

CHAPTER 3

RHYTHM AND DYNAMICS

Tension is necessary for a piece to have a sense of rhythm and dynamics. As Gatta said, “Rhythm allows your visual experience to have a feeling. Your eyes are taken on a visual journey at any speed depending on the quality of the images, type or space treatment” (56). Static pieces are easy to figure out and ultimately uninteresting; generally, design needs an illusion of motion, and tension can provide this. As Lauer said, “A feeling of movement can be heightened by contrast” (208).

A simple way to create contrast in a composition is to make the spaces between objects very different. If everything is laid out the same way with no contrast in the spacing, the design is bound to be boring. Spaces can even be non-existent; items can bleed into one another or overlap to create interesting tension. “The degree of motion created by such overlapping, bleeding, and rhythmic spatial separation will evoke varying degrees of energy or restfulness” (Samara 65). Visual balance is important to maintain when considering spacing though. “Scale and contrast must be modulated to produce the right balance between interesting visual dynamics and pleasing, harmonious proportions” (Mullet 52).

Another way to create rhythm, and perhaps the most commonly used, is repetition. There are also many different ways to utilize repetition in a design piece.

“Repeat patterns are only one familiar form. There is repetition of color, direction, weight, texture, dimension, movement, expression, shape and so on. Repetition is an effective way of achieving unity” (Rand 87). The sense of unity provided by repetition is important, because the tension and contrast caused by the rhythm and dynamics can be nicely balanced by unity, making the piece more appealing visually. Once a sense of repetition is established in order to maintain a sense of activity and contrast, an irregularity needs to be introduced. As Meggs said, “Contrast occurs when unlike elements are introduced into the repetitive sequence” (97).

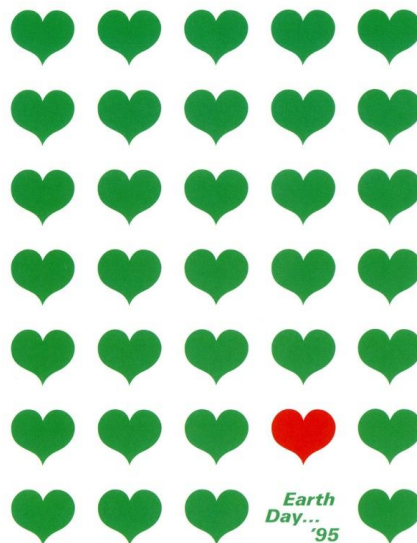


Figure 3 Earth Day Poster – Source: Rand, Paul. *Earth Day Poster*. N.d. Graphic. Printing Code: RepetitionWeb. 23 Apr 2014. <<http://printingcode.runemadsen.com>>.

In Figure 3, there is clearly a repeating pattern of green hearts. The pattern is given contrast when the single red heart and the “Earth Day...’95” title break it. The repetition gives the piece a sense of rhythm and when it is broken it becomes less monotonous and more active.

A piece needs both emphasis and dynamics. According to Kevin Gatta in *Foundations of Graphic Design*, “Tension creates a level of...dynamics. In other words, the movement of your eyes in a visual path...is actually energy which can be more dynamic or static depending on how the elements have been used” (63). Lines are the most common way a designer can create an illusion of movement. “Since our eyes tend to follow it, a line’s potential to suggest motion is basic” (Lauer 114).



Figure 4 Example of Rhythm and Dynamics – Source: Vasarely, Victor. 2013. Graphic. Web design blogWeb. 22 Mar 2014. <<http://www.website-bouwen-blog.nl>>.

In Figure 4, an example of rhythm and dynamics is shown. The spacing between the lines of black and white in this piece are very different as a viewer’s eye moves through it. The placement and spacing create an obvious emphasis on the center of the piece. The extreme tension provided by this creates the illusion that the piece actually could be moving, making for a very interesting and dynamic piece. The simple use of

lines in this piece is very important also. Samara said, “The quality of linearity is one of movement and direction; a line is inherently dynamic” (48).

CHAPTER 4

SYMMETRY AND ASYMMETRY

Tension in relation to symmetry or asymmetry is also an important aspect of good design. In general, an asymmetrical design provides more appealing visual tension; as Mullet said, “Designers discovered the greater vitality and inherent visual interest provided by active, asymmetric layouts” (103). And according to Lauer, “Conscious symmetrical repetition, while clearly creating perfect balance, can be undeniably static” (80). An asymmetric layout can feel more active and alive than a symmetrical one. “This unbalanced composition... more effectively signifies energy and movement” (Meggs 28).

The reason being that asymmetrical layouts have more tension and contrast. Samara said, “Without differences in proportion to compare, the viewer is likely to gloss over material and come to an intellectual rest quickly, rather than investigate a work more intently” (67). And according to Gatta, “Tension creates more or less visual excitement depending on the degree of asymmetry” (36).

Although, a designer should remember that even with an asymmetrical layout, a sense of visual balance and stability needs to be maintained so as to avoid negative and uncomfortable tension. “Lack of balance, or imbalance, disturbs us” (Lauer 76). If a piece is too unbalanced it will feel to the viewer like everything is about to topple over, making the piece unappealing to look at in most cases. Gatta said, “The concept of balance is

present whether an image is symmetrical or asymmetrical” (35). And according to Mullet, “Symmetrical layouts provide this visual equilibrium automatically. Asymmetrical layouts can achieve equilibrium as well, but their tenser, more dramatic form of balance, depends on careful manipulation to compensate visually for differences in the size, position, and value of major elements” (103).

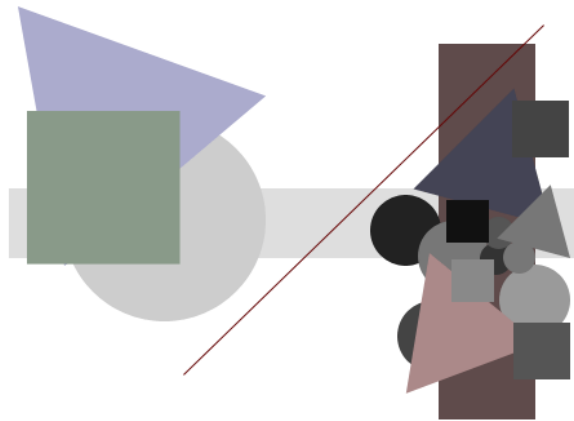


Figure 5 Example of Asymmetry – Source: 2010. Graphic. Symmetry and Asymmetry in Web DesignWeb. 22 Mar 2014. <<http://www.vanseodesign.com>>.

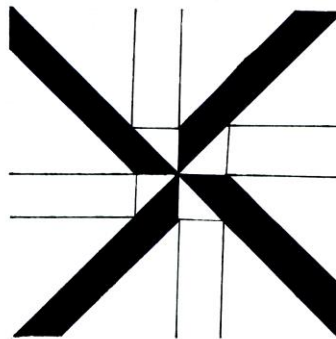


Figure 6 Example of Symmetry – Source: 2010. Graphic. Design Principles: Symmetry/AsymmetryWeb. 22 Mar 2014. <<http://katrina09236498.blogspot.com>>.

Figure 5 and Figure 6 are examples of the differences between symmetry and asymmetry. Generally, viewers will find Figure 5 more visually interesting because of its asymmetry; the piece is not the same on any side. This unbalanced feel to the piece provides an interesting level of visual tension. Figure 6 is essentially the same on all sides and therefore easier and quicker for a viewer to figure out. One must keep in mind though that the lack of tension in symmetrical layouts can be very effective for some purposes. As Meggs said, “A decision to use symmetrical or asymmetrical composition should grow out of the subject matter and design intent, for both can be effective approaches to graphic space” (78).

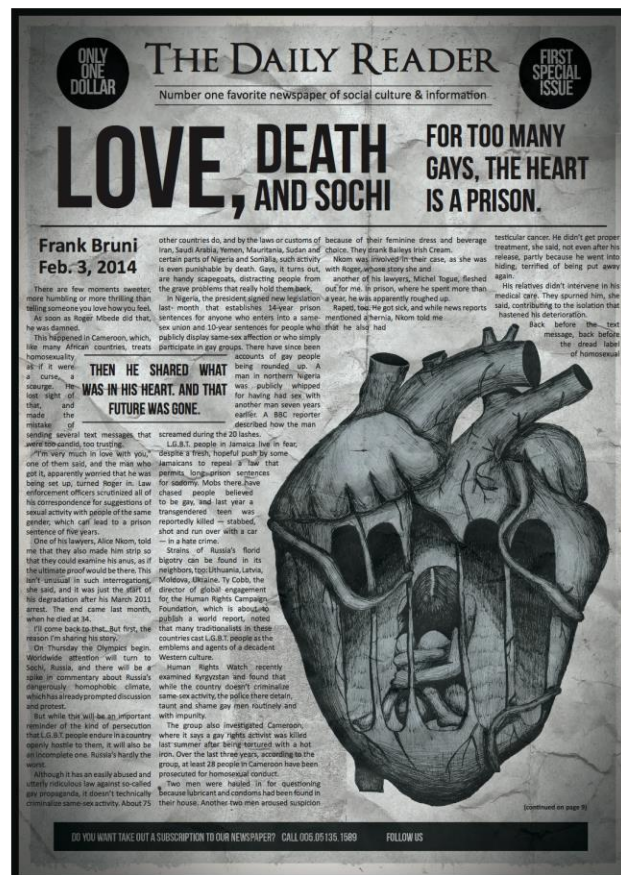


Figure 7 Heart Prison Illustration for Newspaper Article

In Figure 7, the illustration portion of the newspaper layout is an example of asymmetry with balance. The piece is asymmetrical due to the arteries all leaning in one direction and the girl being off center. This provides a very slight sense of unbalance causing an appealing level of tension in the piece. But the heart is roughly the same shape on both sides, allowing for a sense of balance. As well, because the girl is off center slightly to the left and most of the arteries are more to the right, these two elements balance each other out. Although it is not perfect, symmetrical balance, there is a distinct sense of balance to the piece to avoid unnecessary and distracting tension.

CHAPTER 5

NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE SPACE

Negative and positive space or figure-ground relationship is also very important when creating visual tension. “The confrontation between figure and ground defines the kind of visual activity, movement and sense of three-dimensionality perceived by the viewer” (Samara 37). In general, negative space is necessary to balance tension. “Space calls attention to content, separates it from unrelated content around it, and gives the eye a resting place.... If the space gets filled up, the result is an oppressive presentation that no one will want to deal with” (Samara 17). When there is not enough negative space in a piece, it can cause too much tension - depending on the message trying to be conveyed this could easily be unproductive because this high amount of tension can be agitating for the viewer because the parts composing the positive space will run together and there won't be enough separation or depth for them to determine what is most important or what the piece means.

Less is usually more. As Samara said, “The more stuff jammed into a given space, the harder it is for the average bear to see what they're supposed to be seeing” (16). Furthering this idea, Rand said, “For an advertisement to hold its own in a competitive race, the designer must steer clear of visual cliché's.... He does this partly by simplifying” (48). But negative and positive space should not be used in equal parts usually either, because there is not much contrast or tension in that at all and can be

confusing to look at for a viewer. According to Gatta, “The equal use of figure and ground can create a lack of depth, a pattern or a more static composition” (58).



Figure 8 Maroon 5 Album Cover – Source: Maroon 5 Overexposed album cover. N.d. Graphic. Michael Og's design diaryWeb. 22 Mar 2014. <<http://scm.ulster.ac.uk>>.

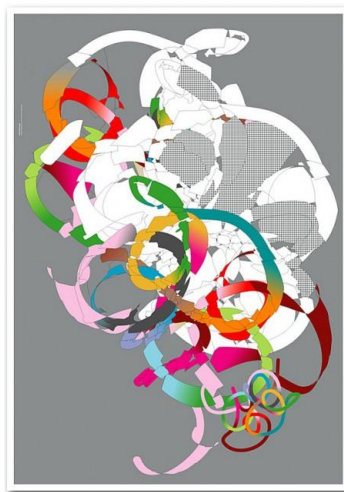


Figure 9 Example of Negative Space – Source: Toko Design Studio. 2014. Graphic. FudgegraphicsWeb. 22 Mar 2014. <<http://www.fudgegraphics.com>>.

Figure 8 and Figure 9 are examples of the difference negative space, or the lack of, can make in a piece. In Figure 9, there is a clear balance between figure and ground,

or positive and negative space. A viewer can find it comfortable to look at the intricate design in the middle because the negative space around it makes it feel balanced. In Figure 8, there is no negative space at all. All of the parts are crammed into the piece with no space in between them. This amount of tension can feel very overwhelming to a viewer.

Although, it should be noted that this was probably the express purpose the designer meant this piece to have. The overwhelming nature of Figure 8 gives the piece an intense, psychedelic feel, which is perfect for this type of album cover, especially with the name “Overexposed.” As Gatta said, “The goal of the visual communicator may be to create more visual tension instead by playing with illusions leading to closure, thus creating shifts in emphasis and more activity in the visual message” (66). Having no negative space, and therefore no visual resting place for the viewer’s eye, can actually communicate this particular message more effectively. As Rand said, “The complex message presented in a single picture more readily enables the spectator to focus his attention on the advertiser’s message” (137).

Another important aspect of figure-ground relationship to keep in mind is that there needs to be a significant separation of value between the figure parts and the ground parts so as to avoid uncomfortable tension. “Sometimes positive and negative shapes are integrated to such an extent that there is truly no visual distinction” (Lauer 154).



Figure 10 Thai Express Wall Mural

Figure 10 shows a balance between positive and negative space used to alleviate tension and allow a viewer to more comfortably navigate the piece. Because the figure is very complex and highly detailed, and also quite colorful, it has plenty of tension in and of itself to create interest. Placing on a plain white background creates enough calming negative space to balance the tension of the positive space and give the viewer's eyes a resting place.

CHAPTER 6

COLOR RELATIONSHIPS

Color relationships can also greatly affect tension in a piece, as well as a few of the other topics being discussed in this paper. As Lauer said, “Certain color pairings are almost difficult to look at. In fact, our eye experiences a conflict in trying to perceive them simultaneously” (254). Presenting colors that have similar saturation and hue will cause too much tension generally, making the colors unpleasant to look at. As Samara said, “At some magical intersection of hue and saturation, the boundary between two colors of the same value will be nearly impossible to see” (87).

In addition, analogous colors create a level of contrast and rhythm. Again, the boundaries are hard to distinguish as colors become more similar in value. Complementary colors, such as red and green, put next to each other can create tension too. As Lauer said, “When complementary colors are placed next to each other, they intensify each other’s brightness” (238). According to Gatta, “As direct opposites, putting these colors next to each other causes extreme visual tension or vibration in your eyes around the point where the two colors meet” (46).

But there is a simple way to ease the tension to a pleasant and interesting level. Complementary or analogous colors can be used with each other on the same design piece if their hues, saturations, or values are different enough and can contrast each other.

Differences in intensity of colors can make a palette more harmonious. The contrast of colors can contribute to establishing hierarchy too. “Applying color to a composition will have an immediate effect on hierarchy, the relative order of importance of the forms in a space” (Samara 102). According to Gregg Berryman in *Notes on Graphic Design and Visual Communication*, “Pure hues are more visible than their tints, shades and tones.” In addition, “visibility of color combinations is determined by contrast.... The more contrast, the more visibility” (35).

Whether a color is warm or cool can affect hierarchy too. Cool colors recede, while warm colors advance. Cool colors are intrinsically not as intense, so they take a background position. Warm colors being more intense, demand more attention, and therefore jump to the foreground. “The artist may use the warm/cool relationship to establish a feeling of depth and volume” (Lauer 242). The tension created by certain color combinations can help designers deliver different messages in the most effective ways.



Figure 11 Visibility of Colors – Source: 2013. Graphic. Get CreativeWeb. 22 Mar 2014. <<http://clearchanneloutdoor.com>>.



Figure 12 Lucien Dubuis Trio Gig Poster – Source: Lucien Dubuis Trio Gig Poster. 2009. Graphic. TrendSpottingWeb. 22 Mar 2014. <<http://www.onextrapixel.com>>.

In Figure 11, the relationships of color and how much tension they create when placed next to each other can be clearly seen. It is self-explanatory, but notably complementary colors of pure hues create the most tension and vibration when intermingled.

In Figure 12, the relationship between warm and cool colors can be seen. Although the blue and red in this piece are intertwined and overlapped, the blue seems to recede into the background, while the red takes a foreground position. The two colors are similar in intensity here, but the blue appears a little less intense than the red. As Gatta said, “Blue is not as bright as red or yellow, for example, so that the intensity of blue would not be on as high a level of brightness as the other primaries” (52). This creates a

comfortable and interesting level of tension, because the colors are not fighting for a viewer's attention as complementary or analogous colors would.

Another important aspect of color that designers have to consider is the use of black and white. Many do not consider black and white colors, but for a designer they are just as important, if not more so, than any color on the color wheel. They create the most contrast when placed next to each other, but can also provide an excellent balance to tension created by other colors. Rand said of the relationship between black and white, "Black and its companion color white are dramatically juxtaposed in the contrast between night and day. The monotony of uninterrupted darkness or light would be intolerable." He also addressed the relationship between black and other colors. "Black in the trunks of trees subtly sets off the brilliance of green or autumn-colored leaves.... Black modestly provides a perfect background for the riotous colors around it" (203).



Figure 13 Caged Bird Poster

In Figure 13, all pure hues are used for the colors, which could have very easily been overly tense. But by dropping the opacity in some of the colors, thereby lessening their intensity, and overlapping them to create depth, the circles are interesting and bright, but not too tense. The mixture of warm and cool colors also creates depth and establishes a small hierarchy within the bird, so not all the colors are fighting for the viewer's attention and creating a vibrating tension. By placing all of the colors on the black background of the bird, it creates a calming balance for all the bright colors as well.

CHAPTER 7

TYPOGRAPHICAL DESIGN

Tension is also pertinent when dealing with typographical design. “Good typography...is not a question of nationality but of sensitivity to form and purpose” (Rand 182). But above all else, type needs to be legible, so tension and contrast do not need to be utilized as much in order to maintain that legibility. If type cannot be read, it serves no purpose. The rules for letter spacing are different from other forms of visual tension. For example, spacing needs to be equally set. As Samara said, “Evenly set sequences of letters show a consistent, rhythmic alteration of black and white - form and counter form repeating at the same rate from left to right” (119).

It is important that leading, spacing between lines of text, and kerning, spacing between characters of words, create a smooth, visually appealing feel to type. As Berryman said, “Excellent, consistent letter-spacing is the key to the professional handling of type” (23). The spacing for type should not be determined by mathematically equal spaces. “Visual design is grounded in perceptual, rather than physical phenomena, so compensation for the peculiarities of human vision is often required” (Mullet 122). Because all letters are shaped differently, optical spacing, or what looks right, is used. “The rule of thumb is to equalize the area rather than the distance between elements” (Mullet 123).



Figure 14 Optical Spacing Example – Source: 2009. Graphic. Anthony Jones: Creative direction, concepts & designsWeb. 22 Apr 2014. <blog.anthonijones.biz>.

In Figure 14, the difference between metric and optical spacing can be seen. The top word is metrically spaced, so the distances between the characters are equal. The bottom word is optically spaced with appealing kerning and tracking, meaning the counter form area between characters is equal. The bottom word is much less tense and unbalanced because the spacing looks cohesive. As Meggs said, “Typography involves complex visual relationships of scale and space.... Subtle spatial relationships are critical to legibility and readability” (17).

Contrast can exist in type to a certain extent in different ways though, as long as it is easily distinguishable and used sparingly. “Some typefaces, for example, feel fast or slow, heavy or light” (Samara 127). Contrasting typefaces and a change in spacing is the best, most appealing way to distinguish headings and sub-headings and even blocks of text that have different information or purpose.

Sticking to two or three typefaces total for a piece is a good general rule; more can create unnecessary tension. But, as Samara said, “Contrast among typefaces that are juxtaposed is critical. The only reason to change a typeface is to gain an effect of contrast, and so the contrast achieved by the combination should be clearly recognizable”

(130). The weight of the type is also an interesting way to create a comfortable amount of tension, but again the contrast needs to be obvious to a viewer. As Mullet said, “Typographic contrasts based on weight should generally span more than one ‘step’ on the scale to ensure adequate legibility” (81). This is in reference to typefaces that have a black, bold, medium and lightweight options. Black and bold next to each other, or bold and medium, do not create enough contrast. Black and medium or bold and light on the other hand create a good amount of contrast that can be clearly distinguished by the viewer.

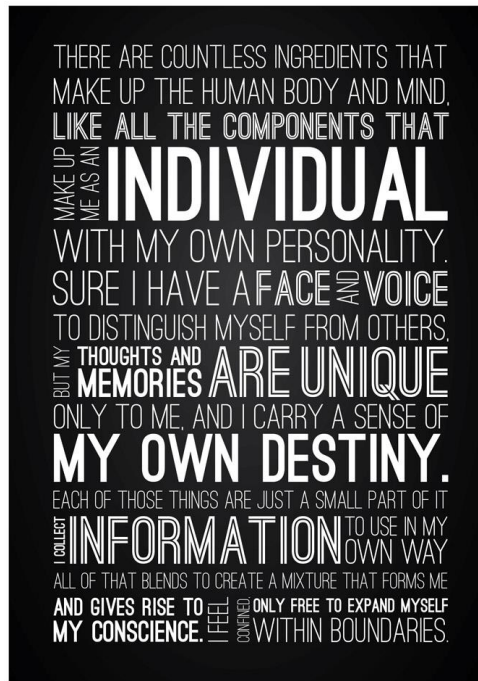


Figure 15 Type Poster – Source: 2012. Graphic. Countless Ingredients: Typographical DesignWeb. 22 Mar 2014. <<http://www.idorumedia.co.uk>>.



Figure 16 Magazine Layout – Source: Magazine Layout. 2014. Graphic. deviantARTWeb. 22 Mar 2014. <<http://eyelessangel.deviantart.com>>.

Both of the above figures show effective typographical design, although they are both very different. Figure 15 is made of nothing but type; the entire page is covered in a single block of typography. One might think this would cause the piece to have an uncomfortable amount of visual tension and be unappealing to look at. But the designer only used one typeface and just altered the outlines or boldness, size, and sometimes even the angle to provide enough interesting contrast. Because of sticking to one typeface and keeping the spacing, leading and kerning, consistent enough to maintain good legibility, the piece is not overly tense.

Figure 16 is very different. Instead of being a purely typographical poster, this example is of a magazine layout. The type's main purpose here is to convey information. The designer stuck to the general rule of only using two or three typefaces. Maintaining this low level of contrast with typographical design is critical, because, as Samara said,

“Too many typefaces are distracting and self-conscious and might confuse or tire the reader” (13). The heading and sub-heading is a different typeface, size and color than the body text, making the distinction clearly recognizable. But the designer did not overuse any of these elements, so the piece is easy to navigate and still very legible while maintaining a level of contrast and interest.

Another element of visual tension that is important to keep in mind when referring to typographical design is the relationship of the background to the type in a piece. The rules of contrast here are different from those when dealing with just the type itself. If type is laid on top of a photograph, vector image, or even just a color, it is important to maintain a high level of contrast between the two so they do not bleed into each other and create a vibrating form of tension. As Meggs said, “Adequate contrast between the image background and the type is critical, because poor legibility can result when the contrast is insufficient” (45).



Figure 17 Kentucky State Parks Foundation Bifold Brochure

In Figure 14, many of the typographical design components relating to tension can be seen. First, only three typefaces are used in the whole brochure to keep it interesting without creating too much tension. This, along with the differences in sizes clearly signifies to the viewer what are the titles, the subtitles and important facts, and what is the main text. Also, white, black, and gray are used for the text depending what color was behind it to create plenty of contrast to the background to maintain legibility. On the front page, the color boxes were added as a background to the type over the photograph to reduce the tension that could have been caused by the type's direct interaction with the photograph in order to make sure it was readable.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, visual tension or the lack of it is a very important aspect of any piece that a designer has to consider when creating an interesting and memorable design piece; the level of tension completely depends on the message the designer is trying to communicate. As Berryman says, “The whole of a visual image is different from and greater than the sum of its parts” (8). Too much visual tension can make a piece feel unbalanced or agitating, too little will surely make it static and dull. Achieving the right amount of tension for your purpose can be done through establishing design hierarchy, creating rhythm and dynamics, utilizing asymmetry and symmetry with balance, mixing positive and negative space, as well as color relationships and typographical design. But, it is always important to keep in mind that what has been discussed and suggested are not so much rules as guidelines. “We do not mean to suggest, of course, that any of these rules should never be broken. As designers have realized for centuries, all rules are made to be broken” (Mullet 15).

Subtlety is important with visual tension. As Samara said, “The reader need not be hit over the head with an optical baseball bat every time the content requires differentiation” (137). Even a subtle change in the amount of tension in any of the areas of design mentioned can make the design more or less effective for the particular

message. Samara also said, “There is no recipe for a good layout. What must be maintained is a feeling of change and contrast” (196). Although there is no set, specific way to go about making a good design, visual tension is definitely an important ingredient.

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